

Bernie Sanders promotes illusions in the Democrats in speaking tour of Midwest

By Tom Hall
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Bernie Sanders appeared at rallies in Kentucky, Ohio and Pennsylvania this weekend as part of a three-day “Protecting Working Families” tour sponsored by the Democratic Party-aligned Moveon.org and the Not One Penny Coalition. The tour wrapped up last night with an appearance in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Sanders’ speaking tour passed through Midwestern factory and ex-factory towns, which have been devastated by decades of deindustrialization and cuts to social spending. Dayton, Ohio was formerly a manufacturing center for GM, before the company eliminated virtually all production in the city in the 1980s and 1990s. The city is now one of the centers of the opioid epidemic, which kills tens of thousands of people each year nationwide. Akron, Ohio, the former center of the rubber industry, went through similar plant closures and is now ravaged by a heroin epidemic.

Louisville, Kentucky, where Sanders addressed the audience remotely from Washington, DC, is a major transportation hub with an increasingly restive working class. Autoworkers in the area put up a huge resistance to the 2015 sellout contract pushed by the United Auto Workers, and there have been repeated threats of strikes by UPS mechanics and airplane pilots.

The Democrats suffered major declines in this region during last year’s election, which (with the exception of Kentucky), voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 but voted for Trump in 2016. A major factor behind the support for Trump in this part of the country was the political prostration by Sanders himself before Hillary Clinton in the general election. For all of his talk about leading “political revolution” against the “billionaire class,” Sanders backed Clinton, a shill of Wall Street and the Pentagon, who has nothing but contempt for the tens of millions of workers devastated by the 2008 financial crash and Obama’s pro-corporate policies.

This all but guaranteed that the only way for voters to

register their social discontent within the narrow framework of the American two-party system was to vote for Trump, who appealed to widespread social anger in an attempt to corral it in a right-wing direction.

Sanders denounced the Republicans’ tax plan as “class warfare” and the “biggest act of thievery in the modern history of this country” at his appearance in Dayton. “This is a moral outrage, it is bad economics, and we will not allow them to get away with it,” Sanders declared.

Predictably, Sanders said nothing about the role of the Democratic Party, which accepts the basic framework of the Republican tax plan and has made tax cut proposals of their own. Their basic concern is that they have been shut out of a process which had previously been bipartisan political theater, with the Democrats providing a “compromise” solution which still results in historic cuts to social spending. Sanders also said nothing about the role of the Obama administration, which had overseen, up till now, the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in American history after the 2008 crash.

For all of Sanders’ denunciations of Republican “class warfare,” the basic thrust of Sanders’ remarks was to inure his audience to the full political significance of the tax cuts, which demonstrates not only the deep crisis of the American ruling class, but the basic incapacity of the capitalist system, a system based on exploitation in which “class warfare” is not one of a number of possible policies but a basic and indelible feature, to satisfy even the most elementary social needs.

Sanders, on the other hand, would have his audience believe that either one of the two parties of the American ruling class could decide not to practice class warfare and return to “good economics” in which the interests of the capitalists are reconciled with the interests of the working class.

Sanders’ promotion of illusions in capitalism’s ability for self-reform found a particularly cynical expression in

a statement published yesterday on his official Senate website, which called on Trump to abide by his 2016 campaign pledges and reject Republican plans to cut Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. “Mr. President, you told the American people time and time again you were not going to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Today, get on the phone. Tell Paul Ryan, tell Mitch McConnell that you will veto any bill that cuts Social Security, that cuts Medicare, that cuts Medicaid,” Sanders wrote.

On one level, Sanders’ pathetic appeal to the fascistic billionaire president to reject a plan for which Trump himself is chiefly responsible for is simply ridiculous. However, Sanders’ statement has a more insidious logic, promoting illusions in the economic program of the Trump campaign, based on national protectionism which scapegoated immigrants and foreign workers for poverty and joblessness in America and which was bound up with his attempt to cultivate a new far-right movement in the United States.

Sanders’ hostility to the political independence of the working class is demonstrated by the fact that the Vermont Senator shares Trump’s basic nationalist orientation. Since first entering Congress more than a quarter century ago, Sanders has attacked trade with China and other countries under the fraudulent banner of defending American jobs. After the 2008 financial crisis, Sanders co-sponsored a bill with Republican Senator Chuck Grassley to restrict the federal visa program for companies that received federal bailout money. During his primary campaign in 2015, Sanders denounced unrestricted movements across national borders during an interview as a “Koch brothers proposal” that would effectively end the American nation state.

After the 2016 election, Sanders declared his readiness to work with Trump on trade war measures, stating that he would “work with anybody who wants to work together to develop a trade policy which tells corporate America they have to look beyond their greed.”

Sanders remains the most popular politician in the country, according to various public opinion policies. While the support for Sanders is an initial and contradictory indication of a growing move to the left and mass opposition to social inequality, Sanders himself intervened in the election to prevent this opposition from escaping the political control of the Democrats and developing into an independent, genuinely socialist movement of the working class.

Acutely aware that the party’s reactionary politics have

engendered mass hostility, which was expressed most strikingly in the debacle in the 2016 elections, a section of the Democrats have sought to integrate Sanders more closely into the Democratic Party leadership. Sanders, along with his supporters in the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America, are trying to reprise his role in the 2018 mid-term elections and beyond.

Their aim is to contain the growing social opposition to Trump and political radicalization of workers and youth within the confines of the Democratic Party, which is conducting a McCarthyite campaign against supposed “Russian interference” and a right-wing identity politics campaign over alleged sexual abuse cases. What Sanders and the Democratic Party fear the most is the emergence of powerful movement of the working class against social inequality and war, and for genuine socialism.

There is growing momentum for a potential Sanders presidential run in 2020. Last month, the *Hill* published the results of a poll of top Democratic Party strategists who proclaimed Sanders to be the favorite among potential primary candidates. Sanders also delivered a pro-war foreign policy speech in Fulton, Missouri in September, at the site of Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech proclaiming the start of the Cold War, which was widely seen as preparation for a 2020 presidential run.

“He is now in a very different position than he’s ever been in before. He’s just stepping into the role,” senior adviser Ari Rabin-Havt told *Politico* in a recent article on Sanders’ presidential aspirations. “Let’s be clear: He’s in charge of outreach for the caucus. So when people say he’s doing a better job of reaching out? Well, yeah, he’s doing his job. This is a new phase of his career.”

Sanders apportioned role is to use left-sounding demagoguery to cover up the actual politics of the Democrats, who have responded to the defeat suffered in last year’s election by moving even further to the right.

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